

THE REPRESENTATION OF BLACK ENGLISH IN BLACK FICTION AFTER THE 1940'S

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1940 is a convenient starting point for our investigation since the publication of Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* that year is considered a departure point of postwar American black fiction. From a linguistic aspect, this novel plays an important role in passing on the new methods of dialect portrayal begun by Zora Neale Hurston and, particularly, Langston Hughes in the 1920's and 1930's. These two writers of the Harlem Renaissance were the first to part with the over a century-old tradition of representing Black English primarily by means of graphic manipulation indicating the phonological features of the dialect¹.

Although Richard Wright's hero Bigger Thomas speaks little, when he does it is in his native dialect. The main emphasis in rendering that dialect is on its grammatical features while the number of pronunciation features depicted is greatly reduced, as in the following extract:

I know I'm going to get it. I'm going to die. Well, that's all right now. But really I never wanted to hurt nobody. That's the truth, Mr Max. I hurt folk 'cause I felt I had to; that's all. They was crowding me too close; they wouldn't give me no room. Lots of times I tried to forget 'em but I couldn't. They wouldn't let me...
(Wright 1990:457).

The only two pronunciation features in the above quotation are the loss of th in "them" and of the first unaccented first syllable from "because" giving "cause", which, although characteristic of Black English, are not exclusive properties of the variety. On the other hand, there are a number of grammatical features of Black English present in the passage, for example, the lack of subject-verb agreement

¹ This shift of emphasis in methodology also signified the growing independence of black authors from the pressures of earlier white writers' attitudes towards blacks and their speech.

("They was"), the use of the double negative ("They wouldn't give me no room" and "I never wanted to hurt nobody") and the use of the adjective "close" instead of the adverb "closely". We must, however, note that there is no overindulgence in the use of these characteristics and, as a result, the impression is realistic and the text is easy to read.

It is interesting to note, however, that, unlike the utterances of Bigger and his family, the speech of those blacks from whom Bigger is alienated because they have accepted the roles created for them by the white man is predominantly represented through pronunciation features indicated by deviant spelling, including also eye dialect forms²:

Tha' wuz a mighty fine thing you jus' said, suh. Ef anybody needs he'p, this po' boy sho does. Ah'm Reveren, Hammon. (Wright 1990:325)

This trend toward the simplification of dialect in black literature continued after the end of World War Two and soon the use of grammatical features became the norm for representing Black English. This process of realistic dialect rendering was carried on mainly by Richard Wright's disciples who produced the "protest novels" about the dehumanizing effect of oppression in the tough urban world of the north. Soon, however, this kind of protest lost its significance and black writers looked elsewhere for new ideas to fit their new experiences and many of them turned to new methods to represent these ideas.

The social changes experienced by blacks in the United States following the war were not entirely positive: although on the one hand there was a growing integration of blacks into mainstream American life, on the other hand there was growing violence against them too, which, naturally, resulted in the black population's increasing alienation from white America and its culture. Yet the new generation of blacks did not consider returning to Africa as a solution to their problems as many in the 1920's had. Instead, they wanted to assert a separate black cultural identity for themselves in America and one of the expressions of this desire was a radically new kind of literature and an experimental use of dialect.

The two leading black literary figures of the 1950's were James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. Their first novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Invisible Man* (1952), signified a major change both from a literary and a linguistic point of view. Baldwin and Ellison followed the line set by the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the realists who had left behind the earlier modes of dialect rendering, and instead of relying heavily on the pronunciation features of Black English, emphasized the grammatical characteristics of the dialect. These two writers, however, went further than their forerunners: they committed themselves to representing Black English more fully by including in their literary dialects the rhythmic qualities of black speech, too³.

² The literary significance of contrasting the two methods of dialect representation is discussed in more detail in Lynda Hungerford's article.

³ Interest in this field was prompted by a new awareness of the cultural significance of black music, particularly of jazz and of the blues in the late 1940s and early 1950's.

In James Baldwin's novel, for example, pronunciation features are kept to a minimum. As far as grammar is concerned, the main emphasis is on the following few features of the dialect: lack of subject-verb agreement, the use of multiple negation, the peculiarities of the tense system and lack of auxiliaries in questions. Some of these characteristics appear in the following quotation:

'I done asked you,' cried his father in a fearful exasperation, 'to stop running your mouth. Don't none of this concern you. This is my family and this is my house. You want me to slap you side of the head?' (Baldwin 1954:53)

Baldwin also put considerable emphasis on the rhythm of the dialect and introduced repeated key words and clauses as well as parallel syntactic and rhythmic patterns in the speech of several characters as in the following two quotations:

'yeah,' said Roy, 'we don't know how lucky we is to have a father what don't want you to go to movies, and don't want you to play in the streets, and don't want you to have no friends, and he don't want this and don't want that, and he don't want you to do nothing...' (Baldwin 1954:27)

...Boy, they don't know what to make of old Elisha because he don't go to movies, and he don't dance, and he don't play cards, and he don't go with them behind the stairs. (Baldwin 1954:64)

Ralph Ellison's novel is an even better example of this new step in dialect portrayal, perhaps because of his deeper knowledge of various forms of black speech and his long-time fascination with black music. Like Baldwin, he too called for a full rendering of Black English, which must include the recording of both the rhythm of the spoken language and its imagery. However, he was also aware of the fact that the reading public, especially his white audience, was not yet prepared for such a radical change and, therefore he controlled the impulse to narrate his novel entirely in Black English. In fact, his protagonist speaks almost no dialect at all. Nevertheless, dialect is present in the novel: we witness a wide range of characters from every walk of life (including a southern sharecropper and a bartender, and in New York several factory workers, hipsters, members of the Movement, etc.), each speaking a carefully individualized dialect of his or her own. The distinguishing features of each dialect include both pronunciation and grammatical features, as in the following extract from the speech of the sharecropper:

We ain't doing so bad, suh. 'Fore they heard 'bout what happen to us out here I couldn't git no help from nobody. Now lotta folks is curious and goes outta they way to help.... (Ellison 1965:47)

Note that the number of pronunciation features ("suh" for "sir", "git" for "get", loss of the first unaccented syllables in "Fore" and "bout", "lotta" and "outta")

for “lot of” and “out of”) is higher than the number of grammatical features (“ain’t”, use of the adjective “bad” instead of the adverb “badly”, use of the multiple negative: “couldn’t git no help from nobody”). The use of the present tense verb form in “happen” instead of “happened”, as well as of “they” instead of “their” may be considered both as pronunciation features and grammatical ones. Extracts from the speech of northern, and probably more educated blacks, reveal the opposite: in the utterances of Mary Rambo, Brother Trap and others, grammatical signals of Black English are more numerous than pronunciation ones, while the main leaders of the Movement all speak impeccable Standard English.

Ellison’s ear for the speech of New York is manifest in his wide use of slang expressions (e.g. “daddy”, “Poppa-stopper”, “pops” and “What you saying, Mr Rinehart, how is your hammer hanging?”) and in his employment of musical-poetic techniques like figuration, meter, repetition and rhyme. One of the most radical, and influential methods of dialect representation can be witnessed in Ellison’s portrayal of the street language of New York City in which Black English is rendered primarily through the typical rhyming slang and by omitted spacing to indicate the rapid speech which is so characteristic of the speech of blacks in that area.

‘All it takes to get along in this here man’s town is a little shit, grit and mother-wit. And man, I was bawn with all three. In fact, I’maseventhsonofaseventhsonbawnwithacauloverbotheyeandraisdonblackcatboneshighjohntheconquerorandgreasygreens’ he spied with twinkling eyes, his lips working rapidly. ‘You dig me daddy?’ (Ellison 1965:144)

We must also remember another of Ellison’s important innovations. As we noted earlier, the protagonist of the novel, both in his narration and in his recorded utterances, predominantly uses Standard English. Only occasionally does he speak a little Black English, and these are always moments of great importance. This would have been unthinkable before Ellison because of the negative connotations associated with the dialect of American blacks. Black English was for centuries identified as the speech of an ignorant people and white writers from the 18th century onwards widely exploited this common belief. Even in the post-war period it is easy to find novels in which blacks are stereotyped as uncultivated and, therefore, ridiculous, nothing they say can be taken seriously. Ellison, on the contrary, assigns Black English to those characters who are to be taken seriously (e.g. the hero’s grandfather) and to moments which are crucially important, while those whom Ellison wishes to parody are made to speak Standard English. With this total reversal of all traditions and the fact that he recognized Black English as a language of valid utterance, Ellison took a critical step forward in the development of the representation of his native dialect⁴.

⁴ A fuller analysis of the innovatory mode of dialect representation in this novel can be found in Sylvia Wallace Holton’s book (pp. 164-74).

The 1960’s saw the strengthening of black nationalist ideas. The emphasis on the positive aspects of black culture and identity helped the emergence of young talents and the further flowering of experimentation with literary forms and language. Experimentation had always been there in black writing, and the latter part of the decade saw its advance, as well as the greatest success of black writers since the Harlem Renaissance.

As in the 1950’s, in this period too, two writers stood at the forefront of the struggle against the influential stereotypes of the past, Le Roi Jones (whose adopted African name is Amiri Baraka) and Ishmael Reed. Both these writers continued toward a radically different portrayal of black speech, a process which, as we have just discussed, had been started by Baldwin and Ellison. However, as, unlike their predecessors, both Baraka and Reed wrote primarily for a black audience, there was no need for them to constrain their natural inclination to innovate as far as the language of their writing was concerned. What they did to dialect, and, on a broader scale, to language seemed extremely shocking then and still stuns a lot of readers, and their innovation actually constitutes the peak reached by black writers so far.

Apart from being a political activist, Baraka was a fine historian of jazz, as well as a poet and a writer. His attitude to language is clearly expressed in his prose fiction of 1967 entitled *Tales*, a collection of sixteen short pieces linked by theme, characters and, most important for us, language. He depicted the musical and rhythmic qualities of Black English and placed great emphasis on vocabulary and sentence structure. One of the short stories, “The Screamers”, which pays tribute to the revolutionary potential of black music by showing how it binds together the musicians and their audience into a community, is a perfect example of Baraka’s use of language. He does not use pronunciation or grammatical features to suggest dialect but but uses typically black vocabulary (“motherfucker”, “ofays”, etc.), several slang expressions (“He knew he had to cook.”, “...watched us while he fixed his sky.”, etc.) and he also tries to indicate the rhythm of the dialect by means of a series of short sentences like “Was hip. Had walks. Knew all about The Apple.”. Baraka’s method of dialect representation is truly experimental: it liberates Black English from all the prejudice associated with the traditional modes of dialect portrayal, and his innovative and consistent use of Black English elevates it from the status of “dialect” to that of “natural medium for black literary expression”.

Ishmael Reed is a similarly creative and innovative figure in post-war black literature. He too experimented with the possibility of writing in Black English, and one of his most successful attempts is found in his early novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967).

They were interviewed by a roly-poly man in 90 per cent rayon Sears and Roebuck pants, mod tie and nineteen-cent ball-point pen sticking from the pocket of his short-sleeve shirt, and hush-puppy shoes. (No shit. Da kat must have been pushing forty and

he wore hush puppy shoes and a polka-dot mod tie. Why da man looked ridiculous!) (Reed 1967:7)

As is obvious from the above quotation, here the narration of the text is both in Standard English and in Black English, i.e., everything said is twice. According to Sylvia Wallace Holton, the first type of text may be meant for Reed's white audience while the second, in the form of comments, is directed at his black readers. Some of the words in the Black English part are spelt phonetically ("da" for "the", "kat" for "cat"), which could be interpreted as Reed's adherence to the traditional methods of dialect representation. Reed, however, uses phonetic spelling to represent not only black speech but also to indicate white non-standard speech. Treating black and white varieties as equal was shockingly new in the 1960's because no other black writer before Reed had used phonetic spelling to portray white non-standard speaking characters, although it had been frequently used to denigrate blacks.

Reed's later novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), represents an even further stage in the representation of dialect. In fact, Black English in this work is hardly apparent to the casual reader who is used to the conventional modes of dialect representation. However, a closer look at the novel reveals a highly idiosyncratic use of Black English in which emphasis is on the aural and rhythmic qualities of the dialect. It is unfortunate that this result of Reed's efforts to explore the literary potential of black speech and to achieve a uniquely black mode of expression is not easily accessible for wider audiences.

After the 1960's a considerable diversification of literature was observable in the United States. Many black writers followed in the footsteps of the experimentalists while others chose to write in a more realistic manner. With the decline of revolutionary ideas and experimental modes of writing, more traditional, but, at the same time, more readily accessible methods began to reemerge. However, the new traditional methods were not absolutely identical to the methods of the writers of a generation before: even though the new traditionalists predominantly use grammatical and lexical features to portray dialect (and, in harmony with the main line of development of dialect representation, put less emphasis on the phonological characteristics of Black English), the influence of the experimentalists is apparent in their inclusion of poetic and rhythmical features in their rendering of black speech.

One of the most significant events of the last decades has been the appearance and growing presence of black women writers on the literary scene in America. These women have added a new perspective to black writing by attracting attention to the difficulties, as well as the joys, of black female existence in a country dominated by whites and men. From a linguistic point of view, too they have achieved heights hitherto unknown in black writing: not only are they thoroughly modern in incorporating all levels of Black English in their dialect representation but, at the same time, they manage to remain comprehensible to both black and white

audiences. A particularly good example of this attitude is found in the works of Alice Walker, perhaps the best known black women writer of our time.

An analysis of her novels and short stories reveals that Alice Walker is intensely aware of the potential of language⁵. In accordance with their social position, her characters do or do not speak in dialect: for example, the college-educated heroine of *Meridian* (1976) speaks Standard English, whereas almost all the blacks in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) use dialect more or less extensively. (It is interesting to examine how Mem, a former teacher, gradually acquires more and more non-standard features as a result of her husband's brutal determination to make her "talk like what she was, a hopeless nigger woman who got her ass beat every Saturday night" (Walker 1970:56).)

Alice Walker's third novel, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple* (1982) represents an even better example of the amalgamation of dialect representation methods. Following the lead of Baraka and Reed, Ms Walker wrote this novel, at least partly, in Black English. It is, however, certainly not as extreme in its rendering of dialect as Baraka or Reed was. The main emphasis, again, is on the grammatical aspects of language, as in the following short passage:

I was in town sitting on the wagon while Mr _____ was in the dry good store. I seen my baby girl. I knowed it was her. She look just like me and my daddy. Like more us then us is ourself. She be tagging long hind a lady and they be dress just alike. I clam down from the wagon and I follow Olivia and her new mammy into a store. I watch her run her hand long side the counter, like she ain't interested in nothing. (Walker 1983:14)

Here we see examples of the treatment of tenses in Black English ("I seen", "I knowed", etc., are all Black English forms of the simple past tense), the rare use of the aspect marker "be" in past tense ("she be tagging"), the use of the double negative ("she ain't interested in nothing") and others, whereas phonological features are scarce ("long hind" for "along behind" and "they be dress" for "they be dressed"⁶).

However, in this novel the dialect representation is further complicated by the fact that the novel is made up of the diary and letters of Celie, an uneducated black girl from the South, which means that not only the events of her life, but also the dialect speech of the other characters is filtered through her mind, as well as her language and her spelling. In some cases, then, the reader may wonder whether a certain form is actually a valid Black English feature or something distorted by Celie's near illiteracy. Examination of this problem, as well as the effect

⁵This essay is the result of extensive research into the modes of dialect representation in black fiction and will form part of a comprehensive analysis of dialect use in Alice Walker's works.

⁶It is obvious from the context that the forms "I look" and "I watch" are clearly meant as past tense forms, yet the -ed is lost due to a phonological rule, namely the reduction of consonant clusters. The form "clam" may be the result of the same process (plus the monophthongisation of diphthongs) but is sometimes considered as a relic past tense form.

on the reader of the contrast of Celie's uneducated Black English and her sister's letters from Africa in Standard English, would, however, go beyond the bounds of this article, and we shall, therefore conclude the examination of this particular novel by pointing out that dialect here is acknowledged as a proper subject for literary representation and is used as a valid medium for the expression of serious thoughts and ideas.

It is our hope that this positive approach to Black English continues, and, by proudly revealing the extraordinary qualities of Black English in their own writing, black writers will in the years to come succeed in changing the general public's attitude to the dialect and its speakers.

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